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# Problems of Romanticism in Transpersonal Psychology: A Case Study of Aikido

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Romanticism is becoming increasingly prevalent in transpersonal psychology, subverting efforts to develop scientific approaches in this subfield of psychology. As a case study of some of romanticism's problems, the martial art and transpersonal system of Aikido is examined in regard to cultural errors and unwarranted supernatural assumptions. Specifically, six latent cultural errors (related to location, authority, time, ethnicity, narcissism, and transmission) are identified and critiqued while supernatural claims are challenged with alternative scientific explanations. In view of romanticism's problems in fostering such cultural errors and embracing supernatural explanations when more ordinary ones suffice, the importance of transpersonal psychology's resisting the challenge of romanticism is advocated and suggestions for the further development of this subfield as a science are provided.

Transpersonal psychology is engaged in a struggle for scientific legitimacy as romanticism sweeps over the field, frequently portraying science as inadequate for and irrelevant to addressing transpersonal concerns (see Friedman, 2002). Though some have discussed romanticism within psychology in a positive light (e.g., Schneider, 1998), others have seen romanticism and science as antithetical (e.g., Salzinger, 1999), a position I share. Among its destructive features, I consider romanticism to include the rejection of rationality, fascination for the so-called exotic, erosion of all bases for discriminating among truth claims, fixation on idyllic images regarding humanity's relationship with nature, and attributions of supernatural claims without evidentiary support.<sup>1</sup> In regard to the pervasiveness of romanticism in transpersonal

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<sup>1</sup>This use of the term "romanticism" here is not necessarily applicable to the historical period designated as "Romanticism" but, rather, is more reflective of broader trends that may have been exemplified during that period and is in accord with its use by other recent psychological authors (e.g., Salzinger, 1999; Schneider, 1998).

psychology, perhaps more so than in any other area of psychology, Wilber (1998) aptly reflected:

“There are many who see all too clearly the sad shape our field is in. They tell me about it all the time. They are truly alarmed by the reactionary, antiprogressive, and regressive fog thickly creeping over the entire field” (p. 336).

In this article, I explore some problems with romanticism’s cultural biases and unsubstantiated supernatural claims through a case study of how these operate in misunderstanding the Japanese martial and spiritual practice of Aikido. In addition, I offer some solutions for bringing transpersonal psychology back into scientific legitimacy (e.g., see Friedman [2002] for a broader discussion of the role of science in transpersonal psychology), a stance I think sorely needed not only by transpersonal psychology as a subfield but also for benefit of the larger field of psychology.

As a martial art, Aikido is essentially an unarmed<sup>2</sup> grappling skill emphasizing circular movement to outmaneuver attackers without directly trying to stop an attack (e.g., Westbrook & Ratti, 2001). This reflects its ancient origins as a combat system used for temporary survival if a samurai became disarmed in battle. Its strategy of avoiding direct use of force stems from necessity—as it would not be effective for an unarmed warrior to try to use force against armed opponents.

As a spiritual practice, Aikido evolved in Japanese culture influenced strongly by Shintoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism, as well as by centuries of brutal warfare that shaped its meaning as a martial art. Aikido has been portrayed frequently as a spiritual practice by both Western (e.g., Palmer, 2002) and Japanese writers (e.g., Saotome, 1993), and its spiritual attributes, such as accepting death without fear and attending to the present without distraction, were adaptive in combat.

Aikido is chosen for this case study for a number of reasons. First, it has influenced the development of transpersonal psychology through, among other factors, Western psychology’s encounter with Eastern philosophies and practices (e.g., through the writings of Suzuki [1959] on the spiritual implications of martial arts). In addition, Aikido has been closely associated with the transpersonal movement through both being taught at a number of schools granting transpersonal psychology degrees (e.g., the Institute for Transpersonal Psychology) and having influenced many transpersonal psychologists (Lukoff, 2002). In addition, I can write with some authority on Aikido since I am a longtime practitioner of the art. I also note that, although Aikido is worth studying *sui generis*, it is useful to extrapolate from how Aikido is often misunderstood in transpersonal psychology under ro-

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<sup>2</sup>Though some approaches to Aikido employ weapons training, this is primarily to teach unarmed self-defense against attacks by weapons or to otherwise further unarmed self-defense skills, such as through adding the weight of weapons in practice to strengthen muscles.

manticism's sway to ways in which other non-Western and ancient traditions are also received through romanticism. Thus the present case study should not be viewed only in idiographic or emic terms, as an isolated instance of one transpersonal system being distorted by romanticism, rather it should also be seen in nomothetic or etic terms regarding its generalizability to other areas within transpersonal psychology that are similarly distorted.

## ROMANTICISM'S PROMOTION OF CULTURAL ERRORS

Among its problems, romanticism fosters various cultural errors that a scientifically-based transpersonal psychology could help elucidate (e.g., by identifying "alternatives to cultural assumptions often found in psychology" [Hastings, Beaird, Ferguson, Karga, & Raley, 2001, p. 151]). Aikido, seen through the lens of romanticism, exemplifies how aspects of a transpersonal system have been embraced without proper discernment. For example, Aikido is a diverse martial art with many variations. Although most schools of Aikido in the West teach only gentle, nonviolent forms of self-defense, others teach hard combat techniques (e.g., Kopitov, 2000) and, while many schools of Aikido shun external competition, others use tournaments (e.g., Clapton, 1996). Aikido, portrayed through romanticism within transpersonal psychology, tends to be seen only as soft and non-competitive, ignoring the reality that brutal and competitive styles also flourish in contemporary times. Since I am focusing on Aikido as seen through romanticism, only the soft and noncompetitive variants of Aikido are discussed when the term is subsequently used in this article.

One way to critically understand Aikido involves recognizing the profound impact of culture on all areas of human functioning (e.g., Kagitcibasi & Poortinga, 2000). The following discussion presents six errors that I have found useful in understanding romanticism as it applies to cultural differences, namely related to Location, Authority, Time, Ethnicity, Narcissism, and Transmission (which are used to form the acronym LATENT). I discuss these LATENT errors applied to the case of Aikido, but they also apply broadly to many other transpersonal systems seen through romanticism and, unrecognized, these errors often bias psychological understandings of various non-Western transpersonal systems.

### Location Errors

There is a tendency within transpersonal psychology to look to the place where a transpersonal practice has originated for its supposed deeper wisdom and meaning, despite the current status of such a practice in that location. For example, many more people now practice Aikido outside Japan than in the country of its origin, yet those interested in Aikido frequently make pilgrimages to the land of its origins to

seek the deeper meaning of the art (e.g., Jones, 1997). Recently when in Japan, I practiced Aikido at the historic Tokyo school where the art's founder had last taught and discovered more international than Japanese students practicing, and when I visited another prominent Tokyo school, the instructor that evening was a Caucasian American, as were most of the students. The romantic flaw in the privileging of place can be seen through an analogy. Imagine the absurdity of modern Japanese physicists looking exclusively to the West, rather than also to their own efforts, for sources of deeper knowledge in physics merely because the discipline originated in the West. It is even interesting to speculate that an art's development often occurs best outside of the context in which it originates—so the highest flowering of Aikido might occur outside of Japan through cross-cultural pollination with the West. This is congruent with the fact that there are many examples of innovations receiving only limited success in their land of origin, such as Buddhism, that has had a powerful influence in Japan and throughout East Asia (and rapidly is making inroads in the West) though it originated in India where it currently has relatively small influence.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the geographic location of a transpersonal system's origin may have little to do with the authenticity or depth of the current tradition.

### Authority Errors

A common cultural problem for Aikido in the West, which is also rampant in many other Eastern transpersonal systems, is the expectation of blind submission to authority. Tart (1990) discussed this as a particularly difficult concern for acceptance of Eastern spiritual traditions in view of Western democratic values, and I find this reminiscent of romanticism's link to totalitarianism during the second world war.<sup>4</sup> The major Aikido school's hereditary transmission of power exemplifies this problem. When Morehei Uyeshiba<sup>5</sup> (known as *O Sensei*, or great teacher) the founder of most approaches to modern Aikido, died, his son (Kisshomaru Uyeshiba) became the heir to Aikido authority. Since the recent death of Kisshomaru Uyeshiba, his son (Moriteru Uyeshiba) in turn is now appointed the new leader of the largest Aikido school. It is difficult for many Westerners with years of Aikido experience, including myself, to accept a hierarchy in which a young person is privileged as the hereditary master of a transpersonal tradition despite the lack of requisite skill that

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<sup>3</sup>Buddhism, founded in India and once the official state religion, now is followed by less than one percent of the Indian population according to 1991 Indian census statistics (India: The Fact File, n.d.). Roughly the same percentage of Buddhists is now found in the US and their numbers are rapidly increasing (Smith, n.d.). According to some estimates, the growth rate of Buddhism in North America exceeds that of any other religion (Long, n.d.).

<sup>4</sup>For a discussion of the linkage between romanticism and various political movements, including totalitarianism, see Berlin's (2001) *The Roots of Romanticism* and Kriegel's (1995) *The State and the Rule of Law*.

<sup>5</sup>Also spelled "Ueshiba" in some sources.

only extensive practice can provide—though this is congruent with traditional Japanese culture. To accept on faith the benevolence of a transpersonal path just because it is part of a tradition, such as the presumed ownership of Aikido by the Uyeshiba clan, can be problematic.

Another example of an authoritarian-based cultural error is the meaning of belt rank in terms of martial artists' competence. Psychologists realize that the actual number of an IQ score is meaningless unless the specific test being used is known, since tests may have different standard deviations so that their scores are not directly comparable. Likewise rank in martial art styles vary. For example, in some modern Aikido styles, the highest rank might be fourth degree black belt, whereas in others, it might go up to 10 degrees—so that a third degree black belt is not the same level in both systems. Even the concept of black belt in martial arts requires examination in this context. It is often speculated that the custom of practitioners not washing their belts led to adopting the black belt as a sign of status, as years of practice resulted in belts becoming blackened with dirt—although the actual origins of the belt rankings used in many contemporary martial arts are disputed. In addition, rank was only established recently in most martial arts while many traditional arts do not have any ranking system and, in most contemporary systems, higher rank (beyond second degree black belt) has nothing to do with competence but is honorific, based on politics.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, giving special credence to practitioners based merely on high rank is a mistake that is commonly assumed by those who do not understand these systems. It is also interesting that many transpersonal psychologists, even though the subfield originated as a counter-cultural (antiauthoritarian) movement, so easily succumb to submission to authority in these guises and obeisance to the authoritarian structure of a transpersonal system may impede gaining meaningful benefit from such a tradition.

### Time Errors

Culture is, among other things, a temporal phenomenon (e.g., the old saying that each generation of a nation is a new nation). Koichi Tohei, the only person to officially achieve the highest ranking in Aikido bestowed directly from O Sensei at his Hombu dojo after the creation of modern Aikido, lived with him while serving as his personal attendant and student for many years, and then went on to establish his own unique variation of Aikido. In an interview, Tohei discussed the mystical explanations employed by O Sensei to explain Aikido techniques (Pranin, 1996). He stated that Aikido's founder used to enjoy chanting the names of Shinto spirits in explaining his deeper understanding of Aikido. Tohei noted that he, and the others

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<sup>6</sup>See Gabelhouse (2000) for a fuller discussion of political dynamics within the martial arts.

of his student cohort, listened respectfully to O Sensei when he chanted to explain Aikido in this fashion, but that they really failed to grasp what the founder meant in this esoteric approach. This was attributed by Tohei to a generation gap, since the young students of O Sensei at that time (who are now the elders of Aikido) were unfamiliar with the ancient Shinto ways, though they were Japanese studying within their own cultural tradition.

I had a similar experience recently while visiting Japan when a number of Japanese business leaders with whom I was consulting asked about what in Japanese culture most interested me. I revealed my interest in Aikido and Zen meditation. My Japanese hosts laughed and, when I hesitatingly requested an explanation for their less than subtle derision, one Japanese friend, a former president of a major Japanese corporation, responded. He stated that my interest in Aikido was analogous to a Japanese person coming to the US with an interest in fast-draw six-shooters from the old West; to my chagrin, they perceived my interest in Aikido as an amusing anachronism. This is congruent with the fact that many Japanese are now apathetic to their rich martial arts heritage, particularly as the rapid growth of interest in Western sports accelerates (e.g., baseball is not only the most popular sport in contemporary Japan, but interest in baseball there exceeds interests levels in the US where it originated; Arndt, Azaria, Newman, & Senat, n.d.). In regard to my interest in Zen meditation, my Japanese friend considered it particularly ironic that I picked this part of Japanese culture to appreciate. He explained that meditation was congruent with my Western biases toward individual activities, since it is primarily an activity in which an individual sits down alone to focus inwardly. He further explained that, for him and most contemporary Japanese people, engaging in such a solitary spiritual practice would be seen as excluding the important others in their lives, which would be contrary to their collectivized approach to life. He viewed meditating alone (and thus ignoring his wife, parents, grandparents, and children during such practice) as unthinkable antisocial. Although conclusions from these anecdotal experiences may not generalize widely to all Japanese people, I find them emblematic of many contemporary trends in Japanese culture. Thus looking to the culture of origin of transpersonal traditions might be a barren strategy if, as is often the case, these sources are now temporally irrelevant.

### Ethnicity Errors

Ethnic prejudice is often found in the practice of Asian martial arts and, more generally, in other Eastern spiritual traditions. For example, Korean Hapkido is a tradition almost identical to Aikido (e.g., Shaw, 1997). However, there is a strong animosity between the two traditions that parallels the long-standing ethnic tensions between the two cultures (e.g., see *Martial Arts America*, n.d.). Hapkido practitioners tend to deny the recent origin of their art from Japanese sources while, vice versa, Aikido practitioners tend to denigrate the innovations from Hapkido

achieved through combining Japanese approaches with indigenous Korean styles of combat (e.g., flamboyant kicking techniques). This is despite the undeniable close relationships between the styles, namely the terms Aikido and Hapkido are translated into English identically, are written in both the Japanese and Korean languages using the identical Chinese depictions, have demonstrably similar origins, and their techniques overlap considerably. This type of ethnic prejudice is also quite common in many Asian martial arts practiced in the West in which awarding high rank is limited to just those who are of the ethnic heritage from which the art originated, discriminating against highly adept Western practitioners.

One variant of this error is the xenophilia frequently found in Western martial arts in terms of undeserved halo effects. For example, I recollect a fellow student who studied martial arts with me when we were both young beginners. He also happened to be Asian by birth, though he was raised in the US by Caucasian-American adoptive parents since a baby (and his language and thought processes were clearly more in line with his cultural upbringing). Yet he is now revered by his students, and many in the community where he teaches his martial art, as an authentic Eastern master who possesses the supposedly secret knowledge of the allegedly inscrutable Orient. His increased ascribed status, solely due to his racial background, does not correspond to his level of actual achievements in the martial arts. I think this type of adulation seriously misplaced. Unfortunately, I have seen many similar examples of xenophilia in America, particularly when supposed Aikido masters whose skills may not be very impressive, visit from Japan. Typically, they are given unwarranted respect which more qualified Western teachers are often denied. Thus, the ethnicity of a practitioner of a transpersonal system should be seen as unrelated to the authenticity or depth of the practitioner's skills.

### Narcissistic Errors

Aikido is often lauded by its devotees as the most advanced, hence best, of all the martial arts, even in terms of being superior for self-defense over all others—despite that it is often seen as relatively impotent by hard-style proponents. Though this tendency is not restricted just to Aikido, to exalt any one martial way on absolutist grounds, to the detriment of others, is parochial. Having studied many martial arts, I conclude there is no one best way for all self-defense applications. For example, Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu (e.g., Gracie, Gracie, & Peligro, 2001) has clearly shown its recent dominance in a certain context, namely in one-on-one, no-rules, bare-handed fighting in a small ring. I have no doubt that an Aikido practitioner, no matter how skilled in Aikido, would not fare well in these conditions. Where Aikido practitioners would excel is in brief unarmed self-defense encounters against multiple attackers who may or may not be armed and in which the only goal is to survive long enough to escape. However, no samurai would willingly have gone into combat unarmed, relying only on Aikijitsu (Aikido's precursor martial art)



and thinking that was superior to being armed with a sword. Likewise, a Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu expert, whose special expertise is choking and twisting the limbs of individual adversaries after taking them to the ground, would not do well against multiple armed opponents. There is a Zen saying, “the mountain does not look down on the river, nor does the river exalt the mountain.” This reflects the need to look at the value of all systems of transpersonal practice in context, considering their relative advantages and disadvantages without mistakenly privileging any as inherently superior. Thus, those who do otherwise exhibit a form of narcissistic blindness that has little to do with the merits of any transpersonal system.

### Transmission Errors

Traditional Japanese pedagogical methods may limit, rather than enhance, teaching to Western students in a wide variety of fields, including possibly impairing the transmission of Aikido. For example, the traditional Aikido teaching methods involve the teacher executing techniques with the students passively observing and then attempting to mimic the teacher’s movements—while students asking questions is considered a sign of disrespect (In America, 1987). This reflects deeper cultural differences than just etiquette. Relevant to this pedagogical style is the fact that the Japanese and English languages differ in their capacity for expression. Japanese language tends to imply more than is stated, whereas English is especially known for being useful for explicit communication. Hence, the type of instruction that might be most useful to a Japanese speaking audience (i.e., an emphasis on demonstration or allegorical stories) might differ from that which could be most appropriate to those who speak English (i.e., an emphasis on direct verbal explanation). A second example is that of the traditional Japanese warm-up exercises performed prior to Aikido practice. From a scientific perspective, commonly practiced stretches involving rapid bouncing movements can lead to painful muscle tears and other significant problems. Nevertheless, these traditional stretching methods are still taught to Aikido students in the West, often with deleterious effects. I conclude that the traditional teaching method of a transpersonal system may not be the most effective way for its transmission, particularly in another cultural context.

### Understanding Romanticism’s Cultural Errors

These six latent cultural errors are not meant to be exhaustive of all of the types possible in assimilating indigenous transpersonal systems, such as Aikido, into transpersonal psychology. However, I think they are roughly representative of a larger set of errors that stem from romanticism’s lack of appropriate discernment about what is and is not adaptive in these systems. Alternatively, I advocate the importance of avoiding these and other cultural biases in further developing a science

of transpersonal psychology that can examine transpersonal systems in a way that differentiates what currently makes sense from what should be discarded.

### ROMANTICISM'S PROCLIVITY FOR UNSUBSTANTIATED SUPERNATURAL EXPLANATIONS

I next direct attention to the role of romanticism in fostering a supernatural understanding of Aikido as a magical practice, such as through the numerous stories of the alleged occult powers of accomplished practitioners. For example, Stevens (1987) provides many undocumented descriptions of O Sensei performing extraordinary acts, such as dodging bullets and anticipating attacks before they were launched. While watching the blinding speed in which techniques are executed during demonstrations, observers may be amazed by attackers flying through the air in response to what seems like a mere touch, or sometimes without even a touch, by a defender using Aikido. Even Frager, the founder of the Institute for Transpersonal Psychology (and both an influential transpersonal psychologist as well as an accomplished Aikido practitioner), claimed to have personally seen the performance of an amazing feat by O Sensei when the man was over eighty years old. O Sensei was observed by Frager to:

... hold a staff out with one hand, literally just hold the staff out straight, and have four people push it, at right angles to the staff. Now, a three-year-old kid can take a staff away from me with that kind of leverage, and I saw the feet of those men — very strong, husky men, each one almost twice his size. He was maybe 85 pounds soaking wet when I knew him. Their feet were slipping on the floor. It was like they were trying to push a wall. And then he would kind of flick the staff, and they would just fly. (Mishlove, 1998, para. 8)

The cynics might believe that these are merely choreographed performances, like in Western professional wrestling—what some skeptical hard-style martial artists call by the term, “I kid you.” Sometimes such cynicism is warranted, as when overzealous students anticipate their teacher’s moves and consciously make the teacher “look good” (as in respectful deference to an old master) or when a demonstrator purposefully uses trickery (illusions) for self-aggrandizement. As an Aikido practitioner, I know how to perform many such tricks and can appear very convincing. I also know that anticipatory responses to the defender’s moves can be less than deliberate, since the pain of past resistances to powerful techniques can unconsciously condition those in the attacker’s role to make a quick, and often dramatic, exit before the Aikido technique is inflicted. As impressive as these exhibitions may appear, my own experiences with the art enable me to place them within a natural, rather than supernatural, framework. For example, I have carefully stud-

ied many videos of O Sensei performing Aikido (including this amazing feat that was personally observed by Frager, though likely at another exhibition) and, though his technique was superb, I cannot detect anything scientifically inexplicable. Although O Sensei's amazing feat is often interpreted as supernatural, there are other more plausible perspectives. Garrelts (n.d.), for example, offered a very detailed and convincing naturalistic explanation of this particular feat. Likewise, I can pose many naturalistic explanations to account for similarly amazing Aikido phenomena and can duplicate many of them despite my limited skills. After more than 30 years of practicing Aikido (and numerous other martial arts), I now must confess skepticism about O Sensei's, or any other Aikido practitioner's, alleged ability to use supernatural means. However, it must be pointed out that there is still room for exploring the frontiers of human potential and being able to naturally explain, or even duplicate, allegedly supernatural feats does not necessarily disqualify them from still being considered potentially supernatural. For a related discussion on the relationship between transpersonal psychology and parapsychology, see Tart (2001).

One relevant Zen story tells of a master being asked what death and the afterlife hold for humans. After much furrowing of his brows, he finally produced the wise answer, "You need to ask that of a dead Zen master." Whether there is anything outside of potential scientific comprehension occurring in Aikido at the highest levels of its practice is something I cannot definitively answer—since I do not consider myself at this highest level of accomplishment. Acknowledging my limitations as an expert, I turn to a more authoritative source. In the same interview in which he claimed to not understand O Sensei's esoteric explanations of Aikido in terms of chanting the names of Shinto gods, Koichi Tohei was directly asked about the widely-touted magical powers of O Sensei (Pranin, 1996). Tohei responded definitively that, during many years of intimate contact, he never observed O Sensei performing any supernatural act. Further, Tohei lamented that, despite actively discouraging this type of confabulation regarding his teacher, the numerous myths were impossible to suppress. Unfortunately, it seems from my experience that there are many gullible people, even among those with professional credentials in transpersonal psychology and ample experience in the art of Aikido, who accept these myths as valid—and perhaps even misinterpret what they directly see.

## SCIENCE AND AIKIDO

Demystifying Aikido through replacing what appears magical, from the vantages of both ancient Japanese culture and romanticism, with explanations based on sound scientific principles is important for usefully understanding Aikido within transpersonal psychology. Good examples of this strategy are a series of studies on the anatomy of three of Aikido's basic techniques (Olson, Bozeman, & Seitz, 1994;

Olson, Bozeman, Seitz, & Guldbrandsen, 1994; Seitz, Olson, & Stenzel, 1991). That many other Aikido principles have not adequately been translated into a scientific perspective, despite the proliferation of Aikido books, is noteworthy. Though some of these books purport to provide the secrets behind Aikido (e.g., Stevens, 1987), they often continue to transmit notions more congruent with romanticism than a rational explanation of the art. I believe one possible reason is that these principles have generally been learned in the implicit Japanese way and that individuals who have such tacit knowledge may be unable to articulate or even rationally understand them (e.g., try explaining how to ride a bicycle). To outside observers, many Aikido phenomena may look like magic—while the practitioners themselves, who can perform the so-called magic, may be unaware of the principles they are implicitly using. Consequently, the principles I present next are my own distillation based on direct experiences with Aikido filtered through scientific understandings. Of course, I only address a limited sample of Aikido phenomena with the intention of communicating a sense of how scientific explanations, without recourse to positing supernatural causes, could further develop even for advanced aspects of Aikido.

In this regard, I think it crucially important to judge the worth of any supernatural explanation of transpersonal phenomena with critical discernment. One such approach would be to rely on the scientific heuristic of the law of parsimony (or Occam's razor) to attempt to find simpler naturalistic explanations rather than positing complex supernatural ones—especially without compelling evidence for their existence. However, I also support applying scientific methods broadly, in line with James' (1950) call for a radical empiricism. Such an approach allows for many innovative avenues to scientific work, such as Tart's (1972) state-specific science that can be used to research otherwise inaccessible transpersonal phenomena (e.g., exploration of altered states of consciousness with investigators who are in such states to authentically understand them). However, Tart (2001) also argued that science does not have to be limited to materialistic assumptions while remaining good science. I conclude therefore again that the possibility of supernatural explanations for transpersonal phenomena should not be arbitrarily dismissed, but any such claim should be viewed skeptically—especially when more ordinary explanations suffice.

### Basic Principles of Aikido

To begin, there are three principles that form the basis of the term, Aikido. These are derived from the three Japanese characters in that name that roughly translate as “the way of harmonizing with energy.” Within these lie coded what I consider to be the most fundamental, and profound, principles of Aikido.

First, the term *Ai*, which refers to harmonizing, reflects that Aikido involves relationship. It is not something that one can just do to another in an isolated fashion. One must, instead, do Aikido with another in a way that is in accord with this principle. In

Japanese, the term *Ai* has many mystical connotations, but it can be approached in more conventional ways compatible with Western understandings. Likewise, the term *Ki* represents energy in its broadest sense and, though it too is steeped in mystical implications, there are some productive ways of understanding it from a Western perspective that are far less esoteric. In Japanese, *Ki* is such a broad term that it is even included in descriptions of carbonated soft drinks. Finally, the term *Do* (which is the Japanese form of the better known Chinese term *Tao*) means a way or vehicle to obtain a higher purpose. The older and more traditional Japanese martial arts are usually characterized by a name that does not include *Do*. For example, Aikijitsu was the older form of martial art from which Aikido was derived. It is often said that the purpose of a *Do* is to develop the practitioner as a person on a spiritual path rather than to just facilitate learning to be strong in combat. In accord, O Sensei, after having an enlightenment experience, is said to have changed the name of his art to Aikido from Aikijitsu, upon realizing the futility of pursuing traditional combat systems with their emphasis on violence. However, *Do* as a concept also alludes to a principle in itself that can also be understood in scientific terms. It needs to be noted that all three of these terms are recursive in their meanings, in that they mutually reflect back on each other with each modifying the meaning of the other within their context. Nevertheless, analyzing each of these terms separately and in greater depth can lead to a better scientific understanding of the underlying principles and practices of Aikido. I also want to be clear that placing these into a scientific framework does not remove them from the arena of transpersonal psychology where I think they rightly belong. It merely disputes that they are best understood through supernatural means as promulgated by romanticism.

### A Conceptualization of Ai

To be in harmony (or to express *Ai*) with another involves a recognition that there is not a firm distinction between the boundaries of people. At one level, this involves a humanistic recognition that the other is also a free and conscious agent. In this regard, any martial art practice has to take into account the capability of the other to anticipate and counter any move. At a deeper or transpersonal level, it also involves the recognition that the other is not so ultimately different from the Aikido practitioner and vice versa. This leads to an ethical understanding that the other should be treated as the self in a different manifestation. This concept is the basis of many Western and Eastern religious and spiritual traditions (e.g., Judaism's golden rule of righteousness and Buddhism's *karuna* or compassion).

Modern transpersonal psychology also offers concepts compatible with this sense of *Ai*, such as the construct of self-expansiveness that considers the interconnectedness of the self-concept within a broad range of space-time possibilities (Friedman, 1983). Similar approaches to transpersonal psychology include Walsh and Vaughan's (1993) definition of the transpersonal as experiences in which "the

sense of identity or self extends beyond (*trans*) the individual or personal to encompass wider aspects of humankind, life, *psyche*, and cosmos" (p. 3) and Grof's (1985) definition in which the transpersonal is defined when "consciousness has expanded beyond the usual ego boundaries and has transcended the limitations of time and space" (p. 129), both of which resonate with the meaning of Ai. This is also congruent with the insights of many other psychological traditions, including psychoanalytic object relations, feminism, constructivism, and others.

The implications of this are far-reaching. If I am attacked by someone, a schism is created in the world. The very act of the attacker, through seeing me as separate in order to attack, places that one out of harmony with me and serves as an impediment to the effectiveness of the attack. This can be rationally understood as based on the principle that an attacker is severely limited when only able to observe from an external perspective. On the other hand, if one harmonizes by keeping in mind the interconnectedness of all, capacities for deep empathy in which I can know the attacker not just as an objective "it" but, instead, also as an aspect of my own self. This potentially enables me to better put myself into the experiential position of the attacker, thus being better able to anticipate and structure a viable defensive strategy. The application of this principle is similar to what is required in the intensely psychological children's game Rock-Paper-Scissors, in which each item has an advantage over, and a disadvantage under, another item (i.e., paper covers rock, rock smashes scissors, and scissors cuts paper). In this game, players sequentially choose one of the items through a hand signal in hopes of gaining the advantage, a decision that always involves knowing that the other also knows that "you know that they know," ad infinitum. To consistently win in this game involves a social psychological skill similar to Ai. From a martial art perspective, if I can make use of this principle of harmonious interconnectedness, I can also accrue a number of other advantages besides just better anticipating an attacker's approach. For example, I might have no interest in defeating or hurting an attacker since I believe it to ultimately be my own self that is attacking me—since I feel so interconnected with the attacker that I consider us as one entity. Then, my job of mere self-defense is much simpler than if I tried to negatively do unto my attacker what is being attempted on me (i.e., both defend myself and try to defeat or hurt the other). Thus transpersonal psychology can provide a number of scientific vantage points (e.g., experiential and social psychological) from which to rationally understand the principle of Ai, in contrast to forms of misunderstanding from romanticism that may indiscriminantly embrace supernatural explanations.

### A Conceptualization of Ki

The Japanese concept of Ki, equivalent to the Chinese *Qi* or *Chi*, is an essential part of much of oriental medicine and spirituality. Eisenberg (1985) described how a teacher of Traditional Chinese Medicine explained this to him, as follows:

Qi means that which differentiates life from death, animate from inanimate. To live is to have Qi in every part of your body. To die is to be a body without Qi. For health to be maintained, there must be a balance of Qi, neither too much nor too little. (p. 43)

In regard to martial arts, Yuasa (1993) stated, “*ki* is a nebulous concept rather difficult to grasp, yet in the martial arts it designates the ‘mind’ in the lower abdomen” (p. 70) which presumably is the source of a unified mental–physical power. In contrast to these ambiguous and romanticized approaches to Ki, Tohei (1994) has extensively discussed the development of Ki in naturalistic ways. I also maintain that the concept of Ki can be understood from a scientific perspective. For example, it can be seen as a phenomenon at least partially related to how muscle tension patterns function. All of us have two different types of skeletal muscles, motor and postural (also known, in general, as fast twitch and slow twitch, respectively). The motor muscles tend to be more under our volition, whereas the postural muscles tend to be more unconscious. One understanding of an important aspect of the expression of Ki in martial arts involves how these muscles are used. At a basic level, our motor muscles are always oppositional, such that each muscle is in a push–pull relationship to another. To obtain maximum strength, ideally when one muscle is pushing, the antagonistic muscle is totally relaxed and allows the pushing muscle free reign. However, this never occurs in actuality, as there is always some degree of residual tension in the antagonistic muscle, known as muscle tone. There are two strategies that can be used to increase the efficiency of our motor muscles in this regard. The first involves learning to more fully relax the antagonistic muscles so that the ones we want to employ are maximally efficient (i.e., we learn to reduce our internal muscle conflicts through learning relaxation). The second involves the concept of “intentionality.” In most situations, we are not completely of one mind; that is, our intentions are split (or even fragmented) over simultaneously incompatible goals. This results in our brain sending contradictory messages to the muscles, so that they push and pull against each other. Imagine someone who wants to strike in anger yet, at a deeper level, part of that person recognizes that this is wrong. The muscles involved in striking (the agonist muscles) are governed by the anger, but the deeper sense of the wrongness of the act sends inhibitory messages to the antagonist muscles, resulting in a diminishment of force. If we can be unified (one-pointed) in our intentions, with minimal internal conflict, the muscles can be most efficient. I maintain that if we embrace a positive and loving transpersonal perspective, we will have less internal conflict since we will be more in harmony with ourselves, as well as with any potential attacker. On the other hand, an attacker whose intentions are aimed against another (keeping in mind that we all are transpersonally interconnected) is always going to have some level of conflict, such as shame or guilt (even if it is deeply layered), literally holding (muscularly) the attacker back.

This is just one rational mechanism to partially understand the phenomenon of Ki that is usually explained exclusively in terms of supernatural romanticism (e.g.,



as a paranormal energy that eludes scientific discovery). Furthermore, it can well explain some of the common demonstrations of Ki, such as the “unbendable arm” in which one can relax an arm in a fashion making it very difficult to be bent. This phenomenon is usually shown to prospective beginning students of Aikido as a demonstration of Ki power and, although it may look impressive, it can be learned by most people in less than 5 min. Insights from various mind–body approaches in psychology, such as from psychophysiological and psychoneuroimmunological studies, have potentially much to offer in this regard.

Many other similar natural mechanisms can be used to explain Aikido’s unusual phenomena. For example, postural muscles<sup>7</sup> (e.g., the slow twitch muscles along our spine that keep us erect) can add considerable strength when properly employed, such as by a skilled Aikido practitioner, in addition to our volitional motor muscles. These can also be involved at a deep unconscious level in our actions, potentially giving great power beyond that which can ordinarily be consciously willed (e.g., when a frail person lifts a heavy object to save a child). In addition, coordinating movement with breathing can greatly enhance power. Likewise, coordinating one’s movements with that of an attacker’s (using *Ai*) can further amplify power. Ki as used within Aikido, therefore, is not necessarily such a mysterious concept, but can be seen instead as the most efficient use of our muscles, albeit in a way highly related to our mental attitude. This understanding of Ki through the sciences of kinesiology and muscle physiology in relationship to transpersonal psychology provides a perspective that does not rely on invoking magical explanations.

### A Conceptualization of Do

The final part of the word for Aikido is *Do*. This refers to with what ultimately we must be harmonizing, the way the universe is unfolding over time from the biggest picture imaginable, perhaps best seen as transpersonal or spiritual. From a Judeo-Christian perspective, this might be seen as the “will of God” and being in harmony with this is seen as a state of “grace” (and movements that appear in accord with this are deemed “graceful,” congruent with the conception of Ki as previously interpreted). From an Eastern perspective, this might involve a recognition and acceptance of the role of “karma.” From a scientific perspective, it might be seen as evolutionary in a broad, whole-systems fashion. More simply, following the *Do* in terms of dealing with a physical attack can be seen as reconceptualizing a win–lose conflict into a larger perspective of preserving life for all in a way that provides a win–win outcome.

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<sup>7</sup>For a more technical discussion of the commonly used distinction between fast and slow twitch muscles, see He, Bottinelli, Pellegrino, Ferenczi, and Reggiani (2000).



Harmonizing with the Do can be illustrated through the Zen story in which a rude but powerful samurai challenged a peaceful tea-ceremony master to a sword duel just to exercise his power. When the samurai prepared to attack, the tea-ceremony master merely raised his sword, accepting that he would die since his sword skill could not match that of the samurai. But he also knew that, at the moment the samurai struck, there would be an opening (due to the schism created in the act of attacking) in which he too could strike the samurai—so the outcome would be that they both would die. The haughty samurai prepared to attack, expecting the tea-ceremony master to be terrified and easily defeated, but instead saw him calm and prepared to die. The samurai, at that moment, realized the inevitable outcome if he were to proceed with the attack—and begged the forgiveness of the tea-ceremony master. The tea-ceremony master in this story was presumably able to relax and have a proper intention (influencing his musculature or Ki) and also was able to harmonize with his potential attacker (Ai) in a way that the win-lose scenario transformed into a win-win (in accord with the Do). This aptly illustrates reconciliation of a dilemma resulting in harmonizing energy with a universal way of peace, in accord with O Sensei's highest vision for his Aikido. From an evolutionary approach, there can be many adaptive advantages seen for our species adopting principles congruent with the Japanese concept of Do, again without recourse to explanations from romanticism.

### Practical Self-Defense Use of the Basic Principles of Aikido

To illustrate one self-defense use of the basic principles of harmonizing with energy in a way that recognizes the larger aspects of life, the complementary Aikido concepts of entering and turning can be considered. Most Aikido moves can be conceptualized as involving one or the other of these basic strategies, and many involve both. For example, an attacker prepares to strike. As the attacker literally gathers energy prior to the attack (i.e., inhaling air and recoiling muscles), an Aikido practitioner can enter into close contact with the attacker, seizing the initiative before the attack is launched. This can be viewed metaphorically as entering into the safe place within a hurricane, the eye of the storm. Alternatively, if the attacker has already launched a strike, rather than to deal with its power, the Aikido practitioner can merely turn away (i.e., turn the other cheek) and let the strike pass by without causing harm. Keeping the same metaphor, this is like staying on the periphery of the hurricane, thus avoiding its destructive power. In a combination of both, the defender may respond to a strike by first entering as it is just at the beginning stage of being launched (before enough energy has been unleashed to do harm), then turning in the direction of the strike in harmony with it. This type of blending with the strike characterizes the art of Aikido at its highest expression of power with minimum effort. To blend in this way requires using the basic principles of Aikido. These include harmonizing (Ai) with the intent of the attacker, use

of efficient muscle movements (Ki) so as not to resist but rather to amplify the aggressive energy, and a recognition of the larger picture (Do) so that the temptation to strike back is resisted. It is interesting to note that resisting the temptation to strike back is not only an ethical choice but also a choice to perform a more effective self-defense maneuver, since striking back could enable an attacker to regain an advantage.

### A Specific Martial Technique Using Entering and Turning

To take this discussion to the level of application in a specific technique, the first of the named Aikido techniques is chosen. Despite it being usually taught first to beginners, it is one of the most difficult techniques to execute well. It is a control technique in which an attacker's attacking arm is firmly grasped at both the elbow and wrist (or hand) in a way that creates optimum leverage for the defender. This technique can be performed in either an entering or turning fashion. For example, if the attacker raises an arm in preparation for bringing it down to strike, the defender can quickly enter while the arm is still being raised (before the strike begins), seizing the elbow and wrist. Thus the attacker's arm, while being raised, provides the additional momentum to move that arm easily, through control of the elbow and wrist, toward and past the attacker's center of balance. This causes the attacker to fall while the defender retains control of the attacker's arm in a joint lock that will cause no permanent damage. Conversely, if the attacker has already begun the downswing with great power, the defender can sidestep slightly and turn away from the arm while seizing the wrist and elbow, using the attacker's downward momentum to easily end in the same position of control while the attacker falls. In addition, a blended technique can powerfully combine both entering, though moving into the attacker to make contact with the arm as it just begins the strike (before too much power has been generated), and then turning in harmony with the arm's power while the technique is applied.

Finally, it is important to note that, though learning specific techniques in Aikido is an important source of gaining practical knowledge, techniques are based on ideal situations that are rarely present in the real world. In actual applications, the higher levels of Aikido are expressed through the spontaneous creation of technique suitable for the unique circumstance at hand, rather than relying only on learned technique.

### CONCLUSION

Modern Aikido is a martial art that can be very effective for noncompetitive and ethical self-defense. I often describe its soft-style forms as follows: Think of all of the ways you could defend yourself well while neither permanently hurting your

attacker or being hurt yourself. It is this emphasis on being nonviolent through harmonizing with the energy of an attacker in a way congruent with a higher purpose that makes Aikido so attractive to transpersonal psychologists. However, it can also be used in highly brutal ways and can be effective in competition against other martial art styles. The practice of Aikido is not just focused on self-defense. Rather, it is also a transpersonal path in which the enemy ultimately becomes understood as one's own inner resistances that require transformation. Furthermore, through outward practice of Aikido, inner transpersonal changes are observable, providing invaluable empirical feedback facilitating growth that is more difficult to monitor in more internal practices. This aspect of Aikido has important implication for many transpersonal practices, such as meditation. For example, there is a Zen story of a meditator who practiced alone for years on a mountaintop until his skills were so refined that he decided to return to his community and teach. As he was walking down the mountain, a young child brushed against him and almost knocked him down. The meditator became annoyed, thinking "How dare this child brush into me when I have spent so many years perfecting my meditation skill?" At that moment he realized that his skills were, indeed, not perfected—since they only were applicable to his solitary life on the mountaintop and did not prevent anger from replacing his equanimity in the social context. In this sense, meditation in a situation of isolation is easier to perform than while under the stress of an active life. And what can be more stressful than being under physical attack? Consequently, to be able to keep one's meditative focus while under such stress is a particularly good test of meditative attainment. This is important to me as an empirically-oriented transpersonal psychologist, namely I particularly enjoy the martial arts since they give clear evidence of whether meditative technique is working or not. In solitary meditation, it is easy to delude oneself, whereas delusions while practicing martial arts result in quick corrective feedback through one of life's great teachers—physical pain.

I think it imperative to also emphasize the trite but true statement that the best defense is avoidance of a conflict, as illustrated with another martial art story. A young martial art master of great prowess was jealous of an older master who was greatly beloved by all the students. The young master decided to attack and humiliate the old master to gain the greater respect of the students who would see how feeble the old master really was. The young master waited outside the old master's class and when the old master left the class first, as was the custom, the young master hurled himself at the old master. Just before the impact, the old master, giving no outward sign of notice of the attack, bent over to tie his shoes—resulting in the young master flying over him and crashing into a wall. This story illustrates Aikido at its highest level in which no physical contact (the ultimate in soft-style self-defense) is made with an attacker—though note that crashing against the wall was not soft from the attacker's perspective. And no magic is required to explain the process or outcome.

Aikido is sometimes viewed as an old person's martial art, since strength and speed are less important than in most other martial arts for self-defense. In fact, it has been observed that, as masters of different styles of martial arts age and their physical abilities wane, they all begin to do what appears more and more to look like Aikido. Perhaps this is due to increased wisdom with age or perhaps it is due to the physical constraints of aging. In this regard, Aikido is also very attractive in that it can be effectively learned by both women and men of varying physical attributes. Also, many martial arts emulate animal forms (e.g., the tiger or the crane). I have heard that the styles of Aikijitsu originated from watching spiders capture their prey, leading to the development of its sophisticated joint-locking techniques. However, I view soft-style Aikido as affiliated with another unique animal, namely it is how spiritually mature human beings might physically defend themselves.

I consider the principles of Aikido to be universal and not constrained by cultural bounds, but how we understand those principles are, indeed, bounded—but not fully determined—by our culture. Hopefully, some of the cultural errors from romanticism that I have pointed out make this clearer. Though these principles are discussed in terms of Aikido, they apply to all martial arts, transpersonal systems, and perhaps potentially to all human endeavors. In addition, approaches to understanding the principles of Aikido, and other transpersonal systems, can flourish in a modern Western context in ways that are congruent with a scientific perspective. In contrast, meanings and practices grafted on whole from non-Western cultures under the influence of romanticism may have counterproductive results, such as placing indigenous practitioners on pedestals that potentially leads to dire consequences (e.g., predisposing the formation of harmful cults). And finally, accepting outrageous claims as valid does not evidence openness but, rather, naivete that has no place in a scientific transpersonal psychology.

One promise of transpersonal psychology is to bridge this gap between cultures in a discerning way that does not just blindly accept other cultures' understandings. Specifically, transpersonal psychology can learn from, and expand through scientific methods, what other cultures have to offer in the transpersonal arena, as well as what our own Western spiritual traditions might appropriately offer. One scientific strategy I specifically advocate for the further development of transpersonal psychology is to actively translate insights and practices from various transpersonal systems into frameworks congruent with a conventional scientific approach. For example, Benson's (1975) translation of yogic mantra meditation into the "relaxation response" has been widely researched and shown effective for many applications (Benson, 1975). Meditation is, in fact, so successfully integrated in contemporary psychology that it is now considered mainstream (Murray, 2002).

This possibility could be related to Aikido in many ways. For example, its pedagogy is one area in which science could beneficially research. It might be useful to examine traditional training as compared to modern scientific methods in terms of their differential effectiveness in skill development or injury prevention. I suspect

that, in transmitting this art within a modern Western context, the traditional methods would demonstrate less success than methods informed by the knowledge of modern exercise physiology and sports psychology. Many other areas of scientific study could also be useful for enhancing the understanding and practice of Aikido.

I conclude that there is no reason for Westerners interested in Aikido to commit cultural errors of romanticism. Instead, we need to cogently explore Aikido principles for what they have to offer to us in our current cultural context with the best tools we have available, namely those of the scientific method. In fact, contemporary Japanese would also tend to want the same, since their culture has undergone such drastic changes over the last generation. O Sensei is often quoted as having said that Aikido is for the whole world, not just Japan. In this regard, Aikido principles are not just for Aikido practitioners, or even just for practitioners of the martial arts. Instead, Aikido principles are for the entire world and all people, with potential applications to many avenues of life. Hopefully, elucidating some of these principles, in a way devoid of magical implications and congruent with contemporary Western culture, will further O Sensei's dream of world peace as well as prepare the way for others to develop this art to even higher levels. In contrast, if Aikido were to only be preserved in a stagnant fashion as understood through romanticism, as a relic incapable of change and constricted to one cultural interpretation, then O Sensei's noble purpose will have been thwarted.

In this sense, transpersonal psychology offers great promise for scientifically understanding Aikido and other transpersonal systems in ways that can have wide benefit for humankind in general, as well as for individuals who seek their own transpersonal growth and understanding. Krippner (1998) recently stated this well: "There is an urgent need in today's fractious world for integrative transpersonal perspectives, especially if presented in ways that are self-critical and able to be linked in contemporary scientific and practical concerns" (pp. x-xi). Unfortunately, the problems inherent in romanticism's current dominance over transpersonal psychology impede fulfilling this crucial need. I hope this article will help the subfield of transpersonal psychology become more wary of romanticism's lure and avoid the pitfall of losing touch with the dream of its founders to develop a scientific approach to the transpersonal.

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